

LETTERS

Hookah smoking and COVID-19: call for action

In response to the *CMAJ News* article by Lauren Vogel,¹ we would like to highlight a method of transmission of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) that is underrecognized in Canada.

A hookah (shisha or waterpipe) is a single- or multistemmed instrument that has been used for smoking various flavoured substances, such as cannabis, tobacco and opium, for centuries and is popular in the Indian subcontinent, the Arabian peninsula, Kenya, South Africa, Turkey, United States and Canada. Across the US, 2.6 million people smoke hookah, and the number of “hookah bars” has mushroomed, with 100 million hookah users globally.^{2,3} In Canada, its high prevalence, in particular among young adults, is a matter of growing concern.⁴

Smoking has emerged as an independent risk not only for transmission but also for severity of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).⁵ Similarly, hookahs are ideal for transmission and may exacerbate the risk for severe COVID-19 through shared use. They have difficult-to-clean long pipes and a cold water reservoir, ideal for transmission of SARS-CoV-2. Furthermore, hookah tobacco smoke contains several hazardous chemicals that injure the respiratory lining and predispose the smoker to viral infections, tuberculosis and other infectious diseases, and the coronavirus is no exception.

Although not formally reported, hookah smoking (like e-cigarettes) could disproportionately increase COVID-19 in youth. Furthermore, Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus was also thought to be transmitted by waterpipe smoking.⁶

Several countries have already placed restrictions on hookah use, given the public health risks of COVID-19 transmission it poses. The cities of Cairo, Egypt, and Abu-Dhabi and Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, recently banned hookah use. In Canada, hookah use per say is legal, but it is illegal in restaurants and bars, enclosed workplaces, and other public and enclosed spaces in Ontario.^{7,8} Similar provisions exist in Alberta and other provinces.⁹

Based on recent advice from the World Health Organization¹⁰ on COVID-19 and hookah use, we suggest that hookah or waterpipe smoking should be regulated to prevent COVID-19 transmission through hookah smoking.

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